

# Investigating Moroccan University Students Difficulties in Dealing with Concrete and Abstract Prepositions: The Case of the English Department in the School of Arts and Humanities, Meknes, Morocco

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**Abstract:-** The present study attempts to investigate the semantic problems that Moroccan EFL (English a Foreign language) university students encounter in their process of learning English prepositions, the case of 'in', 'on', and 'over'. The main objectives are to investigate 1- the semantic problems which are related to concrete and abstract prepositions. 2-the relationship between students' level and the proficiency in the use of prepositions. 3- the effect of L1 linguistic knowledge on learning English prepositions. The sample involved in this study includes 85 EFL university students from three different instructional levels (S2, S4, and S6) at the school of arts and humanities, Meknes. The instrumentation used in this study includes a test which is in the form of sentence completion. It aimed at examining students' proficiency in the use of English prepositions. The results obtained show that Moroccan EFL learners face more difficulties while dealing with abstract prepositions than concrete ones, and L1 (First Language) has a negative impact on learning English prepositions. Put differently, when there are dissimilarities between Moroccan Arabic and English, most errors made are due to interference from L1; however, the results do not support the hypothesis which claims that more advanced learners gradually get rid of the semantic problems and difficulties when dealing with English prepositions.

**Keywords:-** Prepositions; Moroccan EFL Learners, Level of Proficiency; Transfer.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language especially English has become very essential in a time of worldwide communication. People are now aware of its importance. However, it is not an easy task as it seems to be. According to Hymes (1960), in order for learners to accomplish their communicative purposes effectively, they have to possess many types of knowledge including linguistic knowledge which is one of the building blocks of communicative competence. In other words, a competent learner has to know about the way language works: its structure and its regularities.

Interestingly, one of the most troublesome areas to master in English is the correct usage of prepositions. A good deal of what has been written about this issue seems to have been concerned with the immense challenges that

EFL learners face when they are learning English prepositions. However, a little work has been done on its semantic aspects. Thus, the purpose of the current study examines the semantic areas of difficulty which are related to concreteness VS abstractness.

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first section sheds light on the theoretical framework of the study. The second section goes through the methodology of the study, namely setting and participants, data collection procedures and data analysis. The third section presents the results accompanied with an analysis of the research findings. The fourth section refers to some implications drawn based on the major findings.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section will attempt to address the issue of second language acquisition, more particularly the semantic difficulties that EFL learners encounter in their process of learning English prepositions. As a matter of fact, English prepositions constitute a tricky linguistic item for EFL learners; different studies have proven that English prepositions are one of the most troublesome areas for language learners. In order to investigate the grammatical constructions of a language, and to understand their learning process, it is of great importance to cast some light upon the different approaches that have emerged in this regard including contrastive analysis, error analysis, and language transfer. Additionally, the notion of linguistic competence and linguistic performance will be highlighted. Afterwards, some of the studies that examine the difficulty in using English prepositions correctly as well as students' level and their performance will be summed up. This section includes a definition of the prepositions under study i.e., 'in', 'on', and 'over', and the difference between concrete and abstract prepositions.

### A. Second Language Research

Since its emergence, SLA (Second Language Acquisition) research has examined a broad range of theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical issues concerning how second language (SL) is acquired. Over years, studies in linguistics have focused on SLA describing and explaining how L2 acquisition proceeds. It is concerned with both the study of individuals who are learning a language subsequent to their L1 and the study of the learning process, i.e. to identify the internal and external factors that account of L2 (Second

Language) acquisition, and whether it follows the same processes as those of L1 acquisition. To put it differently, second language researchers have attempted to explain a large number of issues including how acquisition occurs, how learners create a new language system, why most SL learners do not achieve the same degree of knowledge and proficiency in a SL as they do in their L1, why only some learners appear to achieve native-like proficiency in more than one language, etc.

In an attempt to understand and explain SLA, scholars have put forward many theories. However, there is no single theory that offers a comprehensible explanation about the whole process. Each theory comes up with a different insight in this complex process. Speaking of which, Krashen's theory is one of the most well-known theories that were formulated to study the L2 acquisition process. In the 1980, Krashen developed the Monitor Model which includes five hypotheses. The acquisition-learning hypothesis is one of the most fundamental of all these hypotheses. Based on this theory, there are two independent systems of second language performance: "the acquired system" and "the learned system". According to Krashen (1980), acquisition is a subconscious process. While you are acquiring you don't know exactly what you are acquiring. For example, when you are reading a book, you know that you are doing the act of reading, but at the same time you may not be realizing what you are acquiring. Another thing, when you hear someone making a mistake, you know that something is wrong; you have that spirit of correctness, but you cannot tell exactly what rule is broken.

Learning, on the other hand, is knowing about language. It is the conscious knowledge. When you are about to say something in a language that you do not master well, the utterance you produce comes up from what you acquired not from what you have learned. In this regard, all the rules that have been learned do only one thing. They act as a monitor. This leads us to talk about the monitor hypothesis which says that learning has the function of monitoring and editing the utterance produced, i.e. before the L2 learner produces an utterance, errors are corrected internally. The third hypothesis is the natural order hypothesis which claims that grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable natural order. For any given language, certain grammatical structures are acquired early while others are acquired later. On the other hand, the Input hypothesis explains how SLA takes place. According to Krashen (1980), when learners receive a comprehensible input that is one step beyond their existing knowledge, the acquisition of a second language occurs. Finally, the last hypothesis, which is the Affective Filter hypothesis, claims that emotional variables have an important role in the acquisition process. In other words, if the learner feels unmotivated, anxious and stressed, he or she may be unsuccessful in learning a second language.

While Krashen believes that one-way comprehensible input is required for SLA, interactionists believe that conversational interaction facilitates SLA. "When learners

are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities they are compelled to negotiate for meaning, that is, to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts, opinions, etc., in a way which permits them to arrive at a mutual understanding." (Lightbourn & Spada, 1999, p. 122) So language acquisition, according to interactionists, is facilitated by the use of the target language in interaction.

However, the creative construction theory suggested by Dulay and Burt (1974) claims that L2 learners do not merely imitate the language they are exposed to, but subconsciously construct mental grammars which allow them to produce and understand utterances they have never heard before. When learners are exposed to an input, they begin to form mental representations of the language and its structure which are eventually present in fluent speech.

#### ➤ *Contrastive Analysis*

Before the emergence of SLA as a field of study, CA (Contrastive Analysis) was conducted in which systematic comparisons between two languages were carried out. At that time, researchers were enthused by the fact of being able to study the linguistic differences and similarities that exist between two languages. Contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) is mainly concerned with the explanation and prediction of problems that learners may encounter in their L2 learning. Lado (1957), in the same vein, argues that the comparison of any two languages is highly likely to lead to an efficient discovery of the difficulties that non-native speakers will encounter in their learning process. Based on this, contrastive analysis hypothesis maintains that positive transfer is likely to occur if L1 possesses the same linguistic features of L2 whereas, negative transfer or interference will be maximized if there is a mismatch between the two languages.

According to Wardhaugh (1970), CAH (Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis) is classified into two versions. The strong version claims that contrasting the native language with the target language helps in predicting learning errors, whereas the second version, the weak version, marked the shift from a predictive power for the study of learners' difficulties to an explanatory power of the observable errors learners commit in their utterances.

However, CA in its strong version cannot predict all the difficulties in the sense that not all errors are the outcome of transfer from native language patterns. As Mackey (1967) put it "if mistakes are made in language learning one may indeed discover their causes, but one cannot say with certainty which mistakes will be made and when they will be made." Most of the studies that have been carried out in this regard in the 70's reveal that learners' difficulty with target language material is hardly predictable by only contrasting the target language with the native language. The difficulties envisaged by a priori CA sometimes do not show up. The learning problems are not always ascribed to the mismatch between the two languages.

### ➤ *Error Analysis*

Error analysis is an approach which aims at studying and analyzing errors made by SL learners. Corder (1967) suggests that in order to examine the issue of language mastery as a whole, it is necessary to analyze carefully the mistakes a SL learner makes. On the one hand, “the errors of a learner, whether adult or a child, are (a) not random, but are in fact systematic, and are (b) not ‘negative’ or interfering in any way with learning a target language, but are on the contrary a necessary positive factor, indicative of testing hypothesis.” (Selinker, 1992). This suggests that classifying errors learners make help researchers understand the SLA process. It tries to investigate what is going on in the mind of SL learners and what kind of strategies they are employing to construct a new language system such as overgeneralization and simplification.

On the other hand, the errors that learners make in their L2 learning process have always been a concern to teachers and textbook designers. Corder (1981) suggests that learners’ errors are significant in the sense that “the teacher can see how far the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn.” This claims that a careful study of a large corpus of spoken and written errors committed by L2 learners provides data that can help teachers determine both the L2 learner’s current knowledge and development. Following learners’ progress, the teacher therefore has a great chance to carry on his studies in accordance with what the learner needs to know and what are the language aspects that need further attention.

Having said this, language educators are encouraged to devise appropriate syllabi and effective teaching materials. Accordingly, errors are to be identified and analyzed carefully. According to Ellis (1997), there are four steps to analyze learners’ errors. The first step is to identify errors by comparing the sentences learners produce with the correct sentences in the target language. However, it is difficult to identify errors as it is necessary to distinguish between errors and mistakes. The second step is the description and classification of errors. After errors have been identified, they can be classified into two types. One way is to classify errors into grammatical categories that have to do with tense, verbs, prepositions, etc. Another way is to identify general kinds of errors that have to do with ‘omission’, ‘misinformation’ and ‘misordering’. The third step is the explanation of errors. Errors are considered as systematic to a certain extent and predictable. In other words, learners’ errors are not random mistakes; they are rule-governed. The fourth and final step is error evaluation. Errors are evaluated according to whether they are problematic or not. They are classified into two types. The first type, global errors, creates problems of understanding because the basic structure of the sentence is wrong. The second type, local errors, affects only one single element in a sentence.

### ➤ *Language Transfer*

The notion of LT (Language Transfer) has been a primary issue in the field of SLA. For most researchers, language transfer is viewed as a process of using native language or other languages known to the researcher in the acquisition of a new language. Mistakes made by SL learners can be traced to the pull of the mother tongue. There is no doubt that the learner is ‘carrying over’ patterns of the mother tongue into his/her foreign language performance. In this regard, Lado (1957) claims that “individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture.” This suggests that transfer refers to the effect of one language (mother tongue) on the learning of another (target language). However, transfer is not always native language influence. “When individuals know two languages, knowledge of both may affect their acquisition of a third. Most probably, knowledge of three or more languages can lead to three or more different kind of source language influence.” (Odlin, 1989).

In addition to this claim which might seem plausible most of the studies that have been carried out reveal that transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired. According to Weinreich (1953), “when a process of second language learning takes place, those linguistic phenomena which are similar in form, meaning and distribution are regarded as facilitating the process, and the transfer is seen as positive. On the other hand, if they are dissimilar, the transfer is considered negative and acquisition is viewed as distorted because the two structures differ.” That is to say, language transfer can occur in learning a new language positively or negatively. In the first case, language transfer has a positive influence on the process of learning a new language because the more similar the two languages are, the more positive transfer will occur whereas in the second case negative transfer occurs because of the differences that exist between the two language structures. Thus, transferability is a relative notion depending on the perceived distance between L1 and L2 and the structural organization of the learner’s L1.

### *B. Linguistic Competence Vs Linguistic Performance*

The correct usage of languages is undoubtedly a necessary aspect of a successful conversational interaction. By merely nature, human language is characterized by rule-governed creativity. According to Chomsky (1965), one cannot be said to be competent in a language without mastery of the linguistic features that govern the use of that language. No matter what, learners have to possess a linguistic competence because the use of language to communicate presupposes a grammar, a mental system of elements and rules that allows them to form and interpret familiar and new utterances. In this line,

“Linguists use the term grammar to refer to a subconscious linguistic system of a particular type. Consisting of several components (phonetic, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics), a grammar makes possible the production and comprehension of a potentially unlimited numbers of utterances because no language can exist without a grammar and no one can use a language without knowledge of its grammar” (O’Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Aronoff, 1991, p. 124).

To put it differently, grammatical competence which is concerned with mastery of the linguistic code enables learners to use knowledge and skills that are necessary for understanding and expressing utterances. A learner’s competence is defined by the set of rules that is presented mentally and manifested in their speech production.

“linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors in applying his knowledge of this language in actual performance.” (Chomsky, 1965)

In general, the notion of linguistic competence as presented by Chomsky entails that there is a difference between competence, which is the innate knowledge one has of a language, and performance being the production of actual utterances, i.e. the way the language system is used in communication.

In considering linguistic competence and linguistic performance in the acquisition of English prepositions, the question that can be raised here is whether learners’ competence is manifested in their speech production. That is to say, does learners’ understanding of prepositions lead to an appropriate usage?

### C. Empirical Studies On Prepositions

Before discussing these studies, this section will first attempt to define the concept of prepositions in general, then a brief account of the spatial meaning of the three prepositions under study, i.e. ‘in’, ‘on’, and ‘over’.

#### ➤ Defining Prepositions


- A preposition is usually referred to as:

“a word which shows the relationship between a noun or a pronoun and another word in the sentence. Prepositions are usually (but not always) placed before the noun or pronoun which they govern.” (Heaton, 1965) In this sense, a preposition is considered to be a connecting item that links two grammatical elements, prepositional complement and the object. In other terms, “a preposition is used to connect nouns and noun structures to other structures in the sentence. A noun structure following the preposition is called the object of the preposition [which can be] a noun ‘we gave a present to our secretaries’ 2- a pronoun ‘we gave a present to them’ 3- a gerund ‘we thought about giving a present to them’ 4- a noun clause

‘we thought about giving a present to whoever worked for us’. The preposition is usually placed before the object. But it may be placed at the end of a sentence in a question: ‘which country did you go to?’ An adjective clause: ‘this map shows the countries which we went to’. A noun clause: ‘we forgot which countries we went to’. An adjectival prepositional phrase is placed after the noun it modifies: ‘the book on the desk is mine’ whereas an adverbial prepositional, like any adverb, may be placed anywhere in the sentence. Or it may be placed at 1- the end: ‘I came at nine o’clock.’ 2- In the middle: ‘he leaves in two hours to visit his friends’. 3- At the beginning: ‘on Monday, I have my French class.’ (Lougheed, 1981)

#### ➤ The meaning of ‘in’, ‘on’, and ‘over’

According to Tyler and Evans (2003), the preposition ‘in’ is used when there is a spatial configuration between a trajector (TR) and Landmark (LM). That is, “the surrounding LM will often offer physical protection from outside forces and hide the TR from outside view.” (Deane, 1992; Johnson, 1987). It describes the subject as being contained or controlled. For example, the sentence ‘the child is sleeping in his room’ is conceived to be portraying the physical environment in which the child is located. The fact that he is surrounded by walls means that he is enclosed by a LM on all sides.

The preposition ‘on’ is used to show that something is on the top of, or on the surface of something else. “This means that the subject is in contact with a Landmark that is supporting surface. If the surface were not there, the subject would fall –given the presence of gravity. The purely geometrical part of this meaning can be represented like this:  as in the book is on the table.” (Lindstromberg, 2010)

According to Tyler and Evans (2003), the preposition ‘over’ has a number of distinct meanings associated with it. On the one hand, it “can code a spatial relation in which the TR is located statically higher than the LM” (Langacker, 1987). That is to say, it is used to talk about movement or position at a higher level than something else as in ‘the picture is over the mantel’. On the other hand, ‘over’ is used when there is a physical contact between the TR and LM as in ‘Sam crawled over the wall’. In third, the preposition ‘over’ can be applied to scenes where “the TR is positioned higher than the LM while being in continuous motion as in the hummingbird hovered over the flower.” (Tyler & Evans, 2003)

#### ➤ Concrete Vs Abstract Prepositions

Given that EFL learners find it challenging to deal with the English prepositional system appropriately, it is believed that part of the reason may be traced back to its polysemous nature. Accordingly, it is of paramount importance to identify the semantic meaning of prepositions. As a matter of fact, English prepositions exhibit a wide variety of meanings in the sense that they convey not merely spatial and temporal relationships, but also non-spatial relationships i.e. abstract. In this regard, Tyler and Evans (2003) stated that “all English



prepositions originally coded spatial relations between two physical entities, while retaining their original meaning; prepositions have also developed a rich set of non-spatial meanings.” That is to say, the same preposition can be used to convey both a concrete and abstract meaning. For example, the preposition ‘in’ can describe a relationship between two objects, such as ‘there is a flower in the vase’, and to describe an abstract relationship between a person and an emotional state, such as ‘she looks in deep thought’. Such examples illustrate the fact that there are two different uses of English prepositions; abstract and concrete.

#### ➤ *English Prepositions in the Moroccan Context*

The correct usage of English prepositions is one of the most problematic tasks for foreign language learners including Moroccan EFL learners. In his academic work, *Spatial and Temporal Uses of Moroccan Arabic Prepositions*, Ech-charfi (2001) stated that “this difficulty is partly due to the lack of adequate and practical manuals, even for the learning of international language, including English and French. But the most crucial reason undoubtedly resides in the fact that the use of prepositions is underlied by cultural systems of beliefs about spatial, temporal and other relations expressed by prepositions.” Ech-charfi (2001)

In this respect, the spatial and temporal uses of Moroccan Arabic (MA) prepositions affect the use of English prepositions in the sense that the huge number of prepositions as well as the different cultural conceptions of space and time vary widely from one language to another. Moroccan EFL learners may get confused to express spatial prepositional meaning simply because “there is no single objective way of reconstructing the characteristics of space.” For example, Moroccan EFL learners may substitute the correct sentence ‘to live on an island’ for the incorrect one ‘to live in an island’ simply because “a learner of English as a foreign language [does not know] that an island is considered in this language as a dimensionless point in order for him/her to produce the correct structure.” Ech-charfi (2001)

#### ➤ *Match and mismatch between L1 and L2 in the acquisition of English prepositions*

A number of studies were conducted to investigate the process of understanding English Prepositions by Arab EFL learners. It is known that there are a number of English prepositions that do not have exact equivalents in Arabic. As a result, negative transfer may take place. In their study, *Understanding the Transfer of Prepositions from Arabic to English*, Malak and Lakkis (2003), tend to identify the areas in which negative and positive transfer occur. Subjects of this study were given a test in order to measure the transfer of prepositional knowledge from L1 to L2. The fact that Arabic does not distinguish between prepositions as English does, negative transfer takes place. “Fifty students (92 percent) were able to use ‘among’ and ‘between’ in the appropriate place. Thirty-two students were able to distinguish between ‘since’ and ‘for’, and 32 students knew the difference between ‘beneath’ and

‘under’. The numbers decreased to 26 in distinguishing between ‘to’ and ‘for’ because students are rarely taught this distinction, while the differences between ‘since’ and ‘for’, and between ‘among’ and ‘between’ are taught.” To put it in a nutshell, Malak and Lakkis’s study (2003) shows that students rely on transfer to judge the appropriate usage of English prepositions.

#### ➤ *The misuse of English prepositions by Moroccan EFL learners*

Another study highlighted in this chapter was carried out by Azeez (2005). This study brings to light the misuse of English prepositions by second language learners. It shows the interference factors that are responsible for the incorrect usage of prepositions as well as students’ knowledge of prepositional rules. The results of the study show that the most misused prepositions are the ones used after adjectives followed by those used after verbs.

It is stated that errors L2 learners make are due to the complexity of the English language itself. There are no certain rules that guide the use of prepositions. Depending on their linguistic background, students’ proficiency differs from one person to another. (Lawal, 2004)

Olasehinde (2002), in the same vein, states that “errors and misuse of language by the students could be attributed to bad teaching and resources”. The other reasons he gave for occurrence of errors include ignorance, lack of practice and carelessness.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. *Participants*

The total number of participants that took part in this study is 100 students. This sample was selected to represent the total of 2066 students who are enrolled in the English department, the academic year of 2013-2014. Students who participated in this study belong to three different levels: first year, second year, and third year. To put it differently, the English department as a whole has 2066 students which is our population. Secondly, it is of paramount importance to find out how this population is distributed among the three levels (S2, S4, and S6) that we are interested in. In this respect, it has been discovered that there are 1530 S2 students (74%), 263 S4 students (12%), and 273 S6 students (13%). This means that if 100 students are selected to be the sample of the present paper, the investigator must survey 74 S2 students, 12 S4 students, and 13 S6 students.

After the proportions of these subgroups had been identified using quota sampling, participants were selected from the three subgroups taking into account the proportions noted in the first step.

However, 14 participants have not completed the tasks, which called for their elimination culminating in an imbalance regarding the number of subjects from each level.

The following table describes the participants of this study on the basis of their availability and their level.

Students' level	Total number	Number of participants
S2	1530	61
S4	263	11
S6	273	13
Overall total	2066	85

Table1:- Number of participants

**B. Instrumentation**

As to the research instruments, one data collection technique- sentence completion task- targeting students' knowledge and use of the English prepositions under study are used. This instrument includes two parts each of which consists of fifteen sentences which express either a concrete or an abstract meaning. (e.g., 'the flower is .....the vase', Mary is .....love') The participants were asked to guess from the context what preposition is appropriate to write in the blanks in order to study the semantic areas of difficulty, as well as investigating language transfer and language proficiency in the use of prepositions.

**C. Piloting**

Before administering the instrument to the target population, the elicitation technique used was piloted with the aim of being aware of the clarity of the instructions and the fittingness of time. The piloting took place on the 6th of May at the school of Arts and Humanities in Meknes. In this regard, three students from each level (S2, S4, and S6) participated in the piloting. The administration of the test took place in a library; it took about 30 minutes to get students answer the test.

The piloting yielded useful indication that some items are to be modified. In the first part of sentence completion task, the sentence N°7: "the sign.....the door says exit" seems to have two possible answers which are 'on' and 'over'. This makes it difficult for the researcher to judge the correctness of students' answers. Hence, it has been necessary to omit this sentence and suggest another where

only one preposition is appropriate. Accordingly, sentence N° 7 becomes: "a rainbow appeared.....the horizon when the sun came out."

**D. Procedures for data collection**

The data collection took place at the school of Arts and Humanities-Meknes in three days, i.e. between 14th and 16th of May. The test was distributed in classrooms where students from the three academic levels in large numbers were expected to have classes. The time was prearranged 30 minutes before the end of the course; however, S6 students were given the task in a break. The reason behind this timing was based on the pilot study mentioned earlier where students performed the same task in the same period of time. Students were not informed about the test in order to avoid any kind of preparation. Instructions and meaning of some items were clarified during the task filling. Some students were very helpful and did not hesitate to be cooperative while others refused to participate.

**E. Data analysis**

The statistical package used to analyze data is SPSS so that the data of this research will be analyzed quantitatively including frequencies, percentages, and diagrams. Yet, there is a section that will be analyzed qualitatively because it is based on analyzing students' answers.

**IV. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION**

**A. Do Moroccan EFL students face more difficulties when dealing with concrete prepositions or abstract ones?**

The first research question addressed in this study focuses on students' difficulties with English prepositions. The main concern is to see whether students face more difficulties in dealing with concrete prepositions or abstract ones. Accordingly a paired simple t-test was applied to analyze the subjects' performance on concrete prepositions and abstract ones. This latter, tells whether there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of two quantitative variable. The t-test results will be presented in the table below.

Level	Type of prepositions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
S2	Concrete	6.08	2.02	.00
	Abstract	3.15	1.92	
S4	Concrete	6.09	1.97	.04
	Abstract	4.73	1.42	
S6	Concrete	7.08	2.43	.00
	Abstract	3.38	1.80	

Table2:- Paired Sample T-test for abstract and concrete prepositions.

As these results indicate, concrete prepositions received the highest mean scores (6.08, 6.09, and 7.08) in comparison to abstract prepositions (3.15, 4.17, and 3.38). The mean scores obtained from this t-test suggest that the difference between the two scores is statistically significant

because the values obtained (.00, .04, and .00) are less than the level of significance which is .05. Accordingly, the results provide support for the claim that Moroccan EFL learners face more semantic difficulties in dealing with abstract prepositions than concrete ones.

In comparison with earlier research on the semantic difficulties encountered by EFL learners, the present study yielded similar results. Atoofi (2013) claims that “students’ competence on various senses of a specific preposition showed that concrete senses like the spatial sense generally cause less difficulty to the student than the temporal sense and other senses that are more abstract. This is because concrete senses are of more semantic transparent than abstract senses, thus causing less difficulty to learners.”

Another problem of learning the abstract meaning of prepositions may lie in the fact that “abstract concepts do not have any graphic representation of their own” (Pakhomov 2000) To put it differently, abstract prepositions carry senses that go beyond space and time which makes it difficult to learn and remember. Abstract prepositions that have non-spatial, non-physical meaning are considered to be non-prototypical because these latter do not evoke a mental image in learners’ mind. Thus, the more prototypical a concept may be, the easier its acquisition will be.

*B. Do more advanced learners gradually get rid of these semantic problems and difficulties?*

As far as the impact of learners’ level on their proficiency in the use of English prepositions is concerned, the present section tends to answer the question whether more advanced learners gradually get rid of the semantic problems and difficulties when dealing with English prepositions. That is to say, does students’ level determine their proficiency in the use of prepositions? In this respect, a one-way ANOVA will be applied in order to compare between the three levels (S2, S4, and S6.) This method is used to compare the mean scores of three or more groups. The one-way ANOVA results will be demonstrated in the table below.

Level	Mean	Sig
S2	4.61	.22
S4	5.40	
S6	4.81	

Table3:- One-way ANOVA for S2, S4, and S6 students.

Based on the data presented, the table shows clearly that the performance of S4 students surpasses that of the other two groups; Surprisingly, S6 students who are considered to be an advanced level show lower performance than expected as the means indicate (S2: 4.61, S4: 5.40, and S6: 4.81). It is true that there is merely a slight difference between the means; however, this does not mean that errors are likely to be affected by the proficiency level. It is clearly shown that there is sort of developmental process characterising S2 and S4 students although sometimes intermediate students (S4) performed better than high proficient learners (S6). This may be attributed to the fact that second year students at Moulay Ismail university receive explicit instruction on English prepositions may be because they will be examined on them, especially the period of administering the tasks was when the exams were about to take place.

However, the results do not support the hypothesis which claims that more advanced learners gradually get rid of the semantic problems and difficulties when dealing with English prepositions. Put differently, there were no statistically significant differences between group means as determined by the p value .22 i.e the hypothesis which claims that students level determine their proficiency in the use of English prepositions is rejected.

*C. Does L1 linguistic knowledge have any impact on learning English prepositions?*

Based on what has been presented in the previous sections, the present section aims at investigating the extent to which L1 knowledge can negatively impact the acquisition of English prepositions by Moroccan EFL learners. To analyze this area, the percentage of correct and incorrect answers in which negative transfer occurred is presented.

➤ *Sentence1: The picture is on page seven.*

	Percentage
Correct	35.6 %
Incorrect	60.9 %
In	34.5 %

Table4:- Error percentage of sentence1.

In this sentence, the preposition used instead of ‘on’ is ‘in’ with a percentage of 34.5. The rate of incorrect answers is higher than the rate of correct ones. Thus, about 60.9 % of errors are made by students in the three levels. In this respect, the wrong choice of the preposition ‘on’ in this sentence stems from its use in Moroccan Arabic since in MA ‘on’ is referred to as ‘ɛla’. As a result, students made negative transfer choosing the Moroccan preposition ‘in’ instead of the appropriate preposition ‘on’. This finding is in consistence with some studies conducted on the effect of Arabic prepositions on English prepositions. Hasan and Abdullah (2009), for example find that Arab speakers tend to relate the use of English prepositions to their mother tongue assuming that ‘ɛla’ is used as an equivalent to ‘on’, ‘over’, ‘above’, and ‘at’.

➤ *Sentence2: There is a light over the table.*

	Percentage
Correct	10.3 %
Incorrect	87.4 %
On	79.3 %

Table5:- Error percentage of sentence2.

In this sentence, the majority of students have used the preposition ‘on’ instead of the appropriate preposition ‘over’ with a percentage of 79.3 %. Students have transferred the features of their own language to the target language. In this case, the preposition ‘over’ is translated into ‘on’ believing that the equivalent of ‘on’ is ‘fuq.’ Another reason that may influence the choice of the wrong preposition is the fact that students may not be familiar

with this kind of prepositions. In the same vein, the sentence 8 ‘She held the umbrella over both of us’ yielded more or less the same results. 80.5 % failed to give the correct answer of ‘over’. These high percentages of respondents who could not give the right answer can be related to their incompetency and to L2 negative transfer. This erroneous use is due to the influence of the Arabic structure where usually the preposition ‘on’ is used in such settings.

➤ *Sentence3: I will probably go on the bus*

	Percentage
Correct	25.3 %
Incorrect	72.4 %
In	47.1 %

Table6:- Error percentage of sentence3.

Based on students’ answers, 47.1 % used the preposition ‘in’ instead of the correct preposition ‘on’. Like in the previous sentences, students’ answers are traced back to their mother tongue. In this sentence most of the students transferred the Arabic prepositions ‘in’ which they used instead of the correct preposition ‘on’ in the context of this sentence. If we translate this sentence into MA, the appropriate answer requires the use of ‘fii’ one of the equivalent of the English preposition ‘in’. This fact supports the idea that when there are dissimilarities between L1 and L2, learners make negative transfer. (Lado 1957)

➤ *Sentence4: there is one window with a curtain over it.*

	Percentage
Correct	9.2 %
Incorrect	83.9 %
On	73.6 %

Table7:- Error percentage of sentence4.

83.9 % of students filled in the gap with inappropriate prepositions. 73.6 % used the preposition ‘on’ as the relevant preposition ‘over.’ It is clearly shown that Moroccan students faced real difficulty in providing the right answer in the required situations.

In fine, it can be concluded that a number of errors Moroccan EFL learners make are related to interference from their native language. The main problem for these learners resides in the fact that L2 learners’ acquisition process is significantly affected by L1 knowledge. (Zobl, 1980). English consists of a larger number of prepositions than MA. Accordingly, EFL learners relate them to the more limited number of Arabic ones since not every English preposition has a definite equivalent in Arabic. For example, the Arabic preposition ‘fii’ can be used as an equivalent to ‘in’, ‘into’, ‘at’, ‘during’, ‘within’, and ‘inside’ (Hasan & Abdullah, 2009) Accordingly, the Arabic preposition ‘fii’ as well as other Arabic prepositions

interferes the selection and usage of English ones.” (Hasan & Abdullah, 2009) For example, students’ wrong choice of the preposition ‘in’ instead of ‘on’ in the following sentence ‘spring begins in the first of March’ stems from the fact that in MA the appropriate preposition in this sentence is ‘fii’ which is not the case in this sentence. As a result, students transferred negatively the MA preposition ‘fii’ to English and lead to a misuse of the appropriate preposition ‘on’

On the basis of the data elicited, it is expected that English prepositions create learning difficulties for EFL learners. One possible interpretation for this can be related to the factors influencing the learning of prepositions such as negative transfer. In this regard, when students do not know the appropriate meaning of certain patterns, they tend to resort to their knowledge of MA to look for an equivalent.

### V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

On the basis of the results, some research and pedagogical implications can be derived. Initially, learners’ L1 should be taken into account in course planning because of the existence of transfer. Teachers should help students become aware of the similarities and dissimilarities that exist between the two concerned languages. Accordingly, students will be aware of the fact transfer can negatively affect the acquisition of English prepositions.

In order to help Moroccan EFL learners become better at acquiring and using English prepositions, it might be suggested that an appropriate method of instruction is one in which awareness techniques are employed.

However, teachers seem to give much interest to the syntax of prepositions at the expense of the semantic one. As it has been shown in this paper, the polisemy of prepositions, particularly the one related to concreteness and abstractness of this structure seems to create real problems for Moroccan EFL learners. Accordingly, abstract prepositions need to be taken into account in future SLA research so as to have a clear idea about the factors that make students encounter difficulties during their learning process.

As far as the level of proficiency is concerned, teachers should know that what works for learners at one level of proficiency may not do so when learners are at a later stage of proficiency. Learners learn when they are ready to do so.

Finally, in order to help Moroccan EFL learners become better at acquiring and using English prepositions, it might be suggested that an appropriate method of instruction is one in which awareness techniques are employed. That is, increase learners awareness of particular linguistic patterns.



## VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As is the case of any study, the present paper is not without its flaws. Among the things that might have been of benefit to this study to make it more acceptable on the academic level is distributing the task to a larger number of respondents. The number of students is not enough to be representative of all Moroccan EFL university students, so the results can by no means be generalized.

Secondly, it cannot be claimed that the task used constitute a fair sample of students' performance. That is to say, the generalizations derived from the final results may not hold true facts about the learning process of English prepositions.

Another limitation of this study is that it takes into consideration only two meanings of each of the three targeted prepositions, one concrete and one abstract. Therefore, studying the other meanings of these prepositions can contribute to extending the results obtained in this paper, thus allowing researchers to make more generalizations on how the semantics of prepositions are learned.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the results obtained from the elicitation technique used in this study suggest that:

- 1- The rate of mistakes students made in their attempt to use the targeted prepositions varies from one student to another regardless of their level; however, the result of the test show that abstract prepositions create more semantic difficulties than concrete ones to Moroccan EFL learners. This can be traced back to their incompetence to go beyond senses that are concrete. Another point worth mentioning, when students are familiar with the prepositional usage of certain patterns, they provide the right answer, but in the case of unfamiliarity, they fail to come up with the appropriate preposition.
- 2- Students' level does not determine their proficiency in the use of English prepositions. That is, when the proficiency level is high, it does not necessary mean that errors will decrease.
- 3- The difficulties that students face in dealing with English prepositions are related to interference from their native language. In this regard, MA has a negative impact on Moroccan learners' acquisition of English prepositions. Based on students' answers, a good number of the errors produced results from negative transfer because students relate the English prepositions to their meaning in MA.

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